

The Sustainable regeneration of the Swansea High Street - a cohesive community

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Abstract

This paper discusses the sustainable regeneration of one of Swansea's (UK) most deprived urban quarters known as the 'High Street', once the traditional retail heart of the city. The regeneration strategy and vision has been driven by Coastal Housing Group, a Welsh housing association, since the late 1990s and is striving towards a cohesive inner city community to meet at least one of the goals of the Welsh Government's Wellbeing and Future Generations Act [1]. Context to the regeneration vision is given from the classification of Sustainable Communities from a number of strategies, used across the UK. As part of the regeneration process the paper also gives an overview of Cardiff Metropolitan University's input into the SUREgen research project that conducted interviews with some of the key stakeholders engaged in the High Street regeneration project to investigate tacit knowledge leading to the vision. Finally, the paper discusses how some of the visions for the High Street have been delivered since 2012, and the next steps to be undertaken from 2017-2027; extending the vision of bringing life back into the High Street.

1. Introduction

This paper introduces a Sustainable Urban Regeneration project in one of Swansea's most deprived areas of the city on the High Street. Historical context to Swansea in South Wales, UK is discussed and the relevance of the High Street to Swansea. The sustainability strategies that have contributed to the High Street regeneration which began in the 1990s and continues in 2017 are also discussed. In addition an evaluation of Coastal's vision for a resilient community as part of the SUREgen research project are discussed. Finally, examples of the High Street regeneration project Urban Village are discussed and illustrated from 2012 to 2017, as are the plans for the future.

2. Swansea High Street historical context

Wales is a principality of the United Kingdom (UK) and has seven major cities, of which Swansea has the second highest population of 242,382 people (2015

census) [2]. Like many coastal towns and cities in the UK, Swansea experienced heavy bombing during world war two (WW2), leading to significant rebuilding after the war [ibid]. The economy of Swansea boomed again during WW2 with coal and metal working industries for the war effort, but after it ended these traditional industries declined and coal mining one of the major industries of Wales disappeared by the end of the 20th century [3]. By 1969, Swansea had been made a city, with investment until the 1990s in infrastructure and new buildings as the city grew [ibid]. However, with a UK wide recession in the early 1990s and then again in the mid-2000s these events severally affected the financial prosperity and employment in Swansea [4] As such many parts of Swansea fell into a period of long decline [ibid].

One of the most important areas of a city are those that are around the major transport hubs such as train and bus stations. In Swansea, one of the main highways into the city from the train station is known as High Street, which is situated in the Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) of Castle Two [5]. Castle Two is ranked as 11 out of 1896 for the most deprived areas in Wales, according to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2014 [6]. Unfortunately, since the late 1970's there has been a cumulative decline on the High Street. This critical gateway to the city as visitors emerge from the mainline train station saw the main retail area shift to the west of Swansea city along with key retail outlets. The area's decline was heightened by the rise of out of city retail centres and enterprise zones. The High Street thus became from the 1970's an area with a fairly uninspiring streetscape and essentially a place that people no longer wanted to visit, which continued into the 1980s, see Figure 1 below. All these ingredients conspired unwittingly to create an unwelcoming environment; once prosperous bars (known as pubs in the UK) closed, older buildings became dilapidated, and anti-social behaviour became prevalent. This degeneration was particularly poignant given visitors to Swansea were left underwhelmed by their initial introduction to the city as they hurried along this main artery of the city to simply be somewhere other than on High street.



Figure 1: Swansea High Street early 1980s, uninspiring architecture

3.0 The Swansea High Street Sustainable Regeneration

The decline of Swansea's High Street was not unique to this city, since many towns and cities in the UK experienced these challenges from the 1970s, with the decline of traditional industries and as the UK moved towards service industries and different skillsets for employees. Indeed, where urban regeneration did occur, this for many years favoured the coastal marina, which is linked to attracting tourists to the city. Whilst, inner city sites such as the High Street often missed vital regeneration investment.

3.1 Coastal Housing Group's Vision for a Sustainable High Street

The regeneration of the High Street has been led very much by Coastal Housing Group since the late 1990s, with a focus on developing a sustainable and resilient community, following many best practice strategies and those from the local authority of Swansea – known as the Urban Village. The vision for Urban Village was a multipurpose inner-city regeneration scheme, including residential, office, retail, leisure facilities and a creative hub, which commenced construction in the mid-2000s. Coastal is a registered social landlord that has been developing affordable homes and communities in Swansea and Port Talbot of south Wales UK, with a history of urban regeneration since the 1980s [7].

The best practice strategies that led to the vision for the Urban Village included, accessibility and movement, high quality environment and competitive economy [8]. These factors all link into the Egan wheel, Regional Centre of Excellence (RCE), Bristol Accord and One Planet Living definitions and principles of sustainable communities [9, 10, 11]. There is a great commonality between the principles of one planet living and the Egan wheel, RCE and the Bristol Accord definitions of sustainable communities [ibid]. One Planet Living is a set of sustainability principles set out by World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Bioregional [12]: zero carbon, zero waste, sustainable transport, local and sustainable materials, local and sustainable food, sustainable water, natural habitats and wildlife, culture and heritage, equity and fair trade and health and happiness [ibid]. Indeed, the Welsh Government is one of the few governments in the world, which has a legal duty towards sustainable development [13], as part of One Planet Wales [14] and the Wellbeing of Future Generations 2015 Act (Wales) [1].

The One Planet Wales report outlines key sectors: food and agriculture, construction and built environment, transport and communications, manufacturing and consumer products, commercial and public services, energy and emissions and waste and resources [14]. One Planet Wales “looks at ways for the nation to live and prosper on the resources of one planet”, in an ecologically sustainable economy and links these prospects to the bigger picture of global climate change, resource efficiency, and the overall footprint of human activity” [ibid]. The Egan wheel [15] is one example of the classification of sustainability that sets out seven key factors that make up a sustainable community: governance, transport and connectivity, services, environmental, economy, housing and built environment and social and cultural. The later RCE [16] adds factor, and the Bristol Accord [17] defines

‘a sustainable community as an active, inclusive and safe, well run, well connected, well served, environmentally sensitive, thriving, well designed and built and fair for everyone’.

Having considered all the sustainability strategies above, the main driver for the Urban Village (realised with the support of both the Welsh Government and the City and County of Swansea, UK) was the concept of city centre living - bringing life back to the city after the decline in the 1970s and 1980s, increasing footfall, and increasing spending has been the foundation for this regeneration. Alongside this, following successful examples seen in Birmingham and Bristol, and taking inspiration from other places and spaces in the UK such as Shoreditch High Street in London, is the power of the “Creative Industries”. So, Coastal began construction in the mid-2000s.

3.2 Evaluating Coastal’s Vision for the High Street Sustainable Regeneration

Part way through construction (2008-2012) of the Urban Village project, staff from Cardiff Metropolitan University helped Coastal to evaluate their long term visioning and decision making as part of the SUREgen research project. This was realised through a series of workshops, structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in the project and a number of analysis approaches. Data gathered from these interviews was used to highlight the tacit knowledge in the “Urban Village” project, and the eight key triggers: community, personal motivation, housing demand, local authority, finance, competition, deprivation and **sustainability**. This research led to the development of an EBERE decision map for sustainable urban regeneration - mapping the decision making from tacit and explicit knowledge [18]. In the second analysis IDEF0, which is an advanced level of sophistication for knowledge encoding, was used, and led to the creation of a generic knowledge map (Figure 2) and the creation of a (specific) knowledge ‘place’ map for the Swansea “Urban Village” (Figure 3) by transferring knowledge collected from the interviews from the generic map, [19, 20]. The process oriented approach to sustainable urban regeneration finds place on the knowledge ‘place’ map of urban regeneration in Swansea, where uncertainty is not analytically reduced but encouraged, and taken as a learning source of reality, as it unfolds [20, 21].

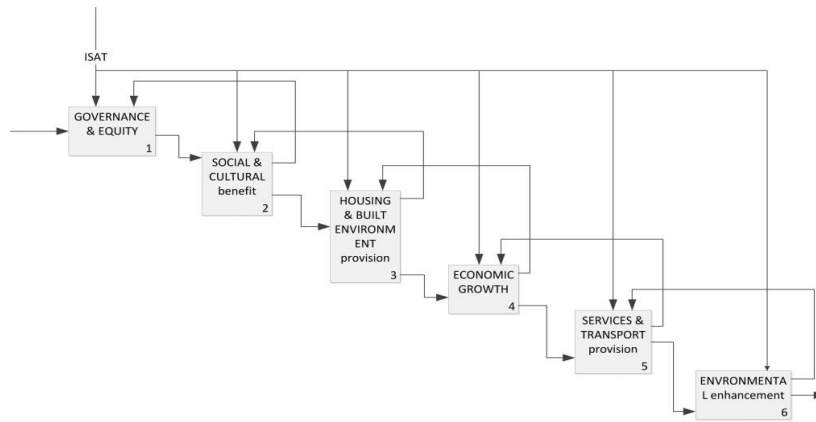


Figure.2. Generic knowledge map for urban regeneration [21].

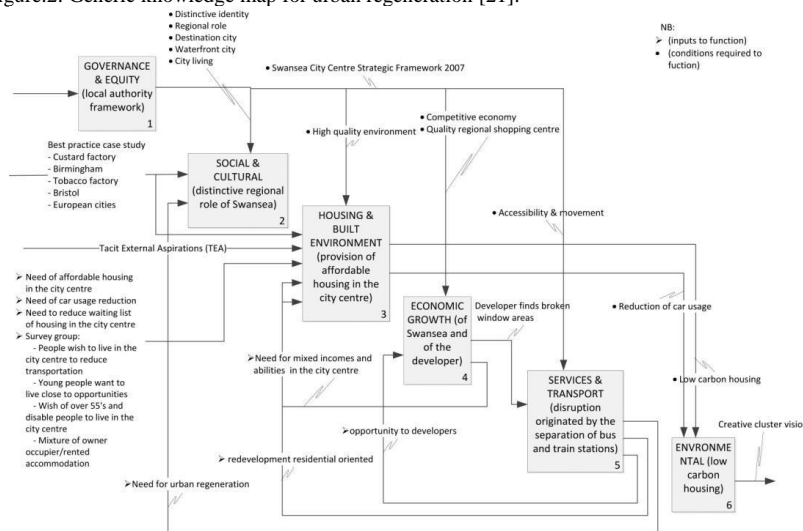


Figure. 3. Knowledge 'place' map for the "Urban Village" case study, Swansea, UK [21].

4.0 Realising the High Street Sustainable Regeneration Vision

In 2017, the vision for the High Street Sustainable and Resilient Community has been recognised, with the project being highly commended in the Wales, UK Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) National awards [22]. The RICS judges praised the mix of building uses of Urban Village and that it has dramatically improved the High Street area in Swansea, UK. Indeed, the project has been put forward for the 2017 UK RICS national regeneration award. Figure 4 below shows the Urban Village at the point of completion in 2012, with a mixture of office developments (including Coastal Housing Group's offices) & the Swansea Evening Post (a newspaper), plus retail units and residential apartments. At the ground floor, there are small pop-up businesses trying to establish themselves and grow, as well as flourishing cafes, a pharmacy, and an art gallery operator. In addition, there is a micro-brewery producing locally brewed beer, and a pub owned by Coastal with a

street-food theme. The Urban Village apartments number 80 and are rented under the concept of “City Living” and seek to bring life, energy, and economic prosperity back to the High Street area. This is the fundamental basis for supporting the sustainable regeneration agenda and also meets several of the Welsh Government’s wellbeing goals as part of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015, of ‘a resilient Wales’, and ‘a Wales of cohesive communities’ [1]. Essentially, the Urban Village has been successful in bringing people back to living and working in the city of Swansea.



Figure. 4. Urban Village on the Swansea High Street in 2015 [22].

Figure 5 below shows the Urban Village in 2017 demonstrating a clear shift from the derelict and empty buildings of the 1970s/80s, compared with Figure 1 above.



Figure. 5. Urban Village on the Swansea High Street in 2017 [23].

At the rear of the Urban Village see Figure 6 below, is the “Creative Cluster” and the “Warehouse” whose purpose is to develop the creative industries in this part of Swansea, UK. As such to create a different environment than the High Street has ever experienced and one which will support Swansea’s City Deal bid, and so establishing the city as an innovative and connected city for the 21st century and beyond. Current tenants in the commercial units include a software hosting organisation called the Tech Hub, who provide space for

entrepreneurial software design specialists. The “Warehouse” on the left of Figure 5 is also available for similar industries. It is anticipated that this area will become established as a creative hub for these industries adding to a new cultural feel for the High Street. In the right hand corner some of the 80 apartments, with southward facing balconies can be seen.



Figure. 5. Rear of Urban Village - Swansea in 2017 [23].

The story is not over, however. There is still much to do and many ambitions to be realised and the next phase is the Urban Quarter. Confidence is gathering momentum, especially with a new student accommodation building for one of the Universities in Swaneas, having received planning consent in 2017, opposite Swansea train station. Once developed, this will add more foot-fall to the High Street area. Coastal is also working with a local Arts and Theatre Company ‘Volcano’ and with funding from the Arts Council Wales is leading an arts based project under “Ideas People Places” called “From the Station to the Sea”. This partnership between Volcano Theatre and Coastal Housing is about Swansea’s High Street and the role it plays in the consciousness of the city and its people. It promotes the idea of the High Street, the lived reality of the place, and the possibilities of its transformation. A programme of diverse yet connected projects has been devised, each of which addresses particular perceptions or concerns and focusses on the needs and desires of specific constituencies. Working with residents, traders, schools, workers, commuters, visitors and socially excluded people, the project aims to disrupt the prevailing power relations through imaginative interventions in the material and social realm of the street. One such project underway looks at the impact shop-front awnings could have on the interaction of people with the High Street and add to the interest and attractiveness of the area. Indeed, Coastal is seeking to acquire more properties on High Street, and is now in conversations with the Local Planning Authority as to how the discussion can also include the Strand (the rear of the Urban Village) in the extension to the High Street Sustainable and Resilient Community.

5.0 Conclusions

This paper has discussed the historical context to the deprivation on Swansea’s High Street after WWII and the transformation as a result of the Urban Village

project led by Coastal Housing Group. The sustainability strategies that have contributed to the Urban Village vision from the Egan Wheel and One Planet Wales have been discussed. As have the visioning process through examples of work from the SURegen project and the Urban Village Knowledge Map. Finally, examples of the realisation of the Urban Village project and plans for the next ten years to 2027 have been discussed and illustrated with new retail units, offices, 80 apartments, bars, restaurants and involvement of a theatre company.

6.0 References

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